

# RANSOM R. CABLE HOUSE

25 EAST ERIE STREET · CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Preliminary Staff Summary of Information

Submitted to the  
Commission on Chicago Landmarks

August, 1989

RANSOM R. CABLE HOUSE  
25 East Erie Street

Date: 1885-86

Architect: Cobb and Frost

Anchoring the southwest corner of Wabash and Erie streets stands an imposing old mansion built of mellow peach-pink stone topped with a black slate roof. Designed in the Richardsonian Romanesque style by the eminent architectural partnership of Cobb and Frost, the house was built in 1885-86 for the family of the president of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway Company, Ransom R. Cable. In choosing this area of Chicago's Near North Side for his residence, Cable was following the lead of other illustrious Chicagoans including the McCormick family. In fact, so numerous were the members of this one particular family living there that the area became informally known as McCormickville.

Unlike the well-to-do in other cities who generally congregated in one select site, Chicagoans elected to live in three different parts of the city. Listings in the 1885 *Elite Directory and Club List* are geographically distributed among the South, West, and North sides of the city. Predominating was the South Side where the George Pullmans and the Marshall Fields lived in splendor on Prairie Avenue. Next in popularity was the West Side along Washington and Jackson boulevards, favored by such as the politically prominent Carter Harrisons. Most fashionable on the North Side was Pine Street (now North Michigan Avenue) and the immediately adjacent area. In *Old Chicago Houses*, John Drury paints a visual picture of Pine Street in its heyday as Chicago's "Gold Coast" in the latter years of the nineteenth century:

What Prairie Avenue was to the South Side of Chicago, Pine Street was to the North Side. On both sides of Pine Street--now North Michigan--in the years after the Chicago Fire stood many fine homes where lived a large group of old and socially prominent families. Among these were the

Pooles, Leiters, Ryersons, McCormicks, Trees, Carpenters, Blairs, Medills, and Rumseys. They occupied residences on Pine and other streets adjoining the old Water Tower. . . . These were the days of gas lamps, hour-glass figures, family albums, top hats, and gold-headed canes. In the years following, fads and fashions changed, the automobile came, the city grew ever larger and larger, and the sedate and decorous life of the Near North Side began to decline. One by one the wealthy families moved away, and in time Pine Street disappeared and became North Michigan Avenue--a broad thoroughfare of exclusive shops, stores, and tearooms. Still standing, however, are a few of the old residences of the Near North Side's fashionable past.

The Ransom Cable House is one of the very few remaining structures which illustrate the early history of this district as a select residential neighborhood.

Even before the Chicago Fire of 1871, leading Chicagoans had lived on the Near North Side. Celebrated early residents included Chicago's first mayor William B. Ogden, research library funder Walter L. Newberry, and Isaac N. Arnold, pioneer lawyer, politician, Chicago Historical Society president, and host to Abraham Lincoln. Undaunted by the Fire were iron and steel magnate Joseph T. Ryerson and Civil War Republican mayor Julian S. Rumsey who, respectively at 615 North Wabash and 40 East Huron, quickly built new homes on the same sites where the fire had destroyed their original ones. During the 1880s and 1890s, the Ryerson mansion was lived in by the family of lumber mogul Augustus Alvord Carpenter.

In 1879 Cyrus Hall McCormick, inventor of the reaper and self-made millionaire, moved into a resplendent new house at 675 North Rush Street. Designed by Cudell and Blumenthal in the French Empire style with equally imposing interior appointments, the dwelling reflected McCormick's role as patriarch of his extensive family and titan of Chicago business and industry. Across the street on the northwest corner of Rush and Erie streets, the same architects designed the home of Cyrus' nephew, R. Hall McCormick, known as an avid collector of British paintings, Wedgwood china, and rare tapestries. L. Hamilton, brother of R. Hall, also lived nearby in an Italian Renaissance house at the northeast corner of Rush and Ontario streets and Cyrus' brother, William Sanderson McCormick, lived at 50 West Huron Street. Another pioneering Chicago family in McCormickville were the Farwells, John and Charles, who lived in adjoining houses at Pine and Pearson streets. John, an early partner of Marshall Field, amassed a fortune in the wholesale drygoods business while Charles served as a United States Senator from 1887 to 1891. Another public servant was Frederick H. Winston, one-time minister to Berlin who lived on the northeast corner of Pine and Superior streets.

Other prominent residents included W.S. McCrea and Abram Poole, members of the Chicago Board of Trade, Joseph Medill, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Lincoln law firm partner E.S. Isham, and merchant Levi Z. Leiter. The financial community was represented by W.F. Dunmer, vice president of the Northwestern National Bank and Samuel M.

Nickerson, founder and president of the First National Bank and benefactor of the Art Institute and Historical Society. His opulent house, diagonally across from the Ransom Cable House on the northeast corner of Erie and Wabash, has remained virtually intact. Now occupied by the American College of Surgeons, the Samuel M. Nickerson House was designated a Chicago Landmark in 1977. Like Ransom Cable, another railroad executive, Perry H. Smith, president of the Chicago and North Western, also chose to be domiciled on the Near North Side. His sumptuous, marble-walled house at the northeast corner of Michigan and Huron streets was of such size and grandeur that it approximated a public institution.

#### *Ransom Cable and the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway Company*

Unlike the Farwells and the McCormicks and others of his distinguished neighbors, Ransom Cable was a newcomer to Chicago. Born in Athens, Ohio on September 23, 1834, he was the son of Hiram and Rachel (Henry) Cable who were among the earliest pioneers of the Northwest Territory. Although he received only a rudimentary formal education, Cable inherited a solid grounding in business from his father, a shrewd man with varied interests including coal mining. In 1857, Cable traveled to Rock Island, Illinois to join his uncle in the latter's mining and railroad business. Finding he liked his relatives and the people of Illinois, he mapped out a career path in Rock Island that led to his being recognized as one of the town's leading citizens in business and civic affairs. Among his ventures was a real estate and investment firm, but his real interest was in railroads, and in 1870 he became president of the Rockford, Rock Island and St. Louis Railroad Company. In 1877 Cable was made a director of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway Company. Fueled by a determination to have a hands-on part in its management, Cable was made assistant to the president in 1879, vice president and general manager in 1880, and in 1883 he became president. In later years he was chairman of the board of the Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railway and president of the Rock Island and Peoria Railway. Ransom Cable was the father of four children, Hiram, Josephine, Fanny, and Benjamin. He was married twice; the first time to the daughter of St. Louis banker Benjamin Stickney and the second time to Jane Buford of Rock Island, Illinois, also the daughter of a banker.

Obviously a self-made man, Ransom Cable, if his biographers are to be believed, was naturally endowed with intelligence and drive. A history of the Rock Island Railroad speaks of his "highly respected business judgment" and his "highly vaunted vision." His biography was included in Andreas' *History of Chicago* and in *Industrial Chicago*. The latter publication has this to say about him:

He has, in the hot rivalry for business, come in contact with the leaders and managers of the largest railway systems of the East as well as the West, including some of the brightest minds of the nations, and has been successful in sustaining the interests of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific road under all circumstances.



His character is strong and in every way admirable. Its most prominent features are decision and stability. He quickly decides upon a course of action and adheres to it with a tenacity that goes as far as any one thing to insure the ultimate success of the issue depending upon it. The public knows Mr. Cable as an eminent railway official and a most able manager of great corporate concerns.

The life of Ransom Cable, conscientious, purposeful, and self-reliant, personifies the character of optimism and capitalist fervor that marked the entrepreneurs of nineteenth-century America.

During Ransom Cable's tenure, the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway became one of the major rail lines operating out of Chicago into the Midwest. First envisioned in 1845 and organized as a going concern in 1847, the company ran its first train in 1852. Among the highlights of its history was the bridging of the Mississippi River for which the road was represented by the aspiring Illinois lawyer Abraham Lincoln against the vested steamboat interests opposed to the project. Another important undertaking was the operation of the first locomotive in the state of Iowa. The building of this part of the rail system was pivotal in the development of the vast western farm lands in Iowa and adjacent states. In *A History of Chicago*, Bessie Louise Pierce summarizes the importance of this major carrier to Chicago:

Next to Chicago's matchless geographic position, the network of rails which extended fan-shape from the city's center was the most significant of all the factors in her leadership. Four major railroads dominated the grain-carrying trade and marked off the supply area: the Chicago and North Western; the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy; the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific; and the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul. After 1872, for over twenty years, these four roads and the Illinois Central maintained, with few exceptions, positions among the five leading carriers of wheat. At the same time they, among the leading midwest railroads, most frequently serviced the states producing the corn, oats, rye and barley marketed in Chicago.

Lumber, iron, coal, livestock, and packaged beef and pork were among the other important commodities shipped on the Rock Island. When Ransom Cable assumed leadership in 1883, the Rock Island comprised 1,381 miles in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas. The rolling stock consisted of 309 locomotives, 203 passenger cars, and 7,489 freight cars. When Cable left the presidency after fifteen years, the railroad had expanded into 3,568 miles of lines owned and leased that traversed or entered Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Oklahoma, and the Indian Territories. A move into Texas was just beginning. The equipment increased to 564 locomotives, 456 passenger cars, and 16,388 freight cars. Revenues were strong and healthy as well. Cable was not without his critics, however, who saw the Rock Island as far behind its competitors in the development of industry along its lines and also weak in terminal facilities. But indisputably, all

in all, Ransom Cable and his railroad made a significant contribution to Chicago's economic leadership during its years of spectacular growth after the Civil War and the Chicago Fire.

### *The Ransom Cable House and the Richardsonian Romanesque*

The Ransom Cable House is solidly handsome in the grand manner of urban Victorian architecture. Placed on a raised basement, the structure rises three stories terminating in a black slate hipped roof. The primary building material is a rough-faced, squared stone, called ashlar, of a soft peach-light pink hue. All the blocks are random in size and positioned in an irregular pattern. Due to its siting on a corner lot, the house features two principal elevations facing onto Erie and Wabash streets, each accented with a steeply pitched gable. These combined with tall chimneys, pronounced dormers, and a miniature turret, or tourelle, over the main entrance elongate the overall impression and offset the weightiness of the massive masonry construction. Long rectangular windows are deeply recessed. The cavernous effect of the asymmetrically-placed portico is created by three semi-circular, low-sprung arches of Syrian origin supported by squat, sturdy columns. Capitals with a square top with rounded-off corners below known as cushion capitals top the columns. The capitals are decorated with intricately intertwined foliate carving in a neo-Byzantine fashion. The same ornamental treatment is applied to the corbel supporting the tourelle and can be seen above and below the windows on the Erie Street facade. A bay window also marks the Wabash Street facade; however in this case, a simple checkerboard pattern is seen beneath the window and the whole is surmounted by an open gallery, or loggia, again a device which lightens the overall medieval fortress feeling. Equal architectural attention has been accorded the coach house at the rear which displays a conical tower and a large arched entry for the carriages and, later, cars. The design is in keeping with and complements the main building.

A strong and stately composition, the Ransom Cable House exhibits most predominantly all the hallmarks of the Richardsonian Romanesque and is an early example of the use of this style for a residential structure. Throughout the nineteenth century, the vocabulary of the eleventh and twelfth century Romanesque formed an integral part of the architectural grammar. But its greatest master and populizer was the Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-1886) who evolved such a highly individual and influential interpretation of the Romanesque that it eventually bore his name--Richardsonian Romanesque. In *The Architecture of H.H. Richardson and His Times*, architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock summarizes Richardson's genius:

His heritage was the romantic generation that had contemptuously renounced the austerity of the classical revival and, in the search for stylistic stimulation, had borrowed indiscriminately from the rich bazaar of historic and exotic styles, the Gothic, Italianate, Norman, Byzantine. By the time Richardson had completed his education at Harvard and at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, this mixed architectural diet had played havoc with the American taste.

In his maturity he developed a personal style that resolved the dilemma in which he found himself: his own good taste and judgment demanded utility, spatial tangibility, function; his public demanded pictorial surface effects. His reconciliation of these disparities resulted in his finest works: Trinity Church, Boston; the Marshall Field Wholesale Store, Chicago; the Allegheny County Courthouse and Jail, Pittsburgh; Sever Hall, Cambridge.

Although the Marshall Field Wholesale Store was unfortunately demolished as early as 1930, another of Richardson's acknowledged masterpieces still stands in Chicago. Located at 1800 South Prairie Avenue, the John J. Glessner House, dated 1886, was designated a Chicago Landmark in 1970. Richardson's qualities of clarity and breadth of expression are rightly regarded as protomodern and, when the internationally famous architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe first came to Chicago from Germany in 1938, the Glessner House was one of the first buildings he expressed a desire to see.

Richardsonian Romanesque is characterized principally by solid volumes, weighty masses, dark hues, and a monolithic scale. Other salient features include rounded arches, broad roof planes, deeply recessed windows grouped in ribbon-like bands, and heavy masonry construction with a uniform rock-faced exterior finish. Adjectives such as powerful and virile are often used to describe the style. The general visual effect depends on the careful integration of a number of bold elements. Richardson's designs struck an especially responsive chord in the builders and architects of the midland prairie states such as Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Interpretations and adaptations of the style were applied to banks, churches, city halls, county courthouses, post offices, schools, and residences, not just in the big cities but in the small towns as well. In *The Spirit of H.H. Richardson on the Midland Prairies*, urban historian Judith Martin explores the reasons for the particular appeal of the Richardsonian Romanesque in the midsection of the United States:

If Richardson's work had any special resonance for these cities, it may have been for its lack of ostentatious "European" ornament and for its use of stonework, a material familiar to German and Central European immigrant settlers. Richardson's style may also have proved symbolically meaningful for mid-western urban builders: while wealthy eastern magnates imported European castles and constructed massive "cottages" at Newport, there was still work to be done in Omaha and Chicago. Richardsonian structures were undoubtedly a comfortable fit for wealthy prairie residents; they could be quite large and internally elegant, yet somewhat subdued in their overall effect. In this way, Richardson's work, and that of his followers, fully encompassed the ambitions and tastes of prairie city builders and residents in the 1880s and 1890s.

That is not to say that other styles were not also favored in the prairie cities during the 1880s and 1890s. But to a man from a pioneering background such as Ransom Cable, the rugged, forthright simplicity of the Richardsonian Romanesque would more aptly reflect

his own serious, sensible work-ethic values than the more complicated and often ostentatious Italianate, Gothic, or Queen Anne.

*The Architects of the Ransom Cable House: Cobb and Frost*

Like their client, Henry Ives Cobb and Charles Sumner Frost found fame and fortune in Chicago although neither were native Chicagoans. A descendent on both sides of old New England families, Cobb was born in Brookline, Massachusetts on August 19, 1859 and received his architectural education at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Born in 1856, Frost was the son of a mill owner and lumber merchant in Lewiston, Maine and also educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Both found initial employment in the Boston office of Peabody and Stearns. Their Chicago partnership was established in 1882 and the firm quickly assumed and maintained a highly regarded position in the architectural community. Of their residential commissions, the most prominent was the palatial Potter Palmer crenelated Norman "castle" which formerly stood on Lake Shore Drive between Banks and Schiller streets. After this partnership was dissolved in the late 1880s, Charles Frost, in a new joint venture with Alfred Hoyt Granger, went on to a successful specialization in railroad station design. The LaSalle Street Station (1901-03) and the Chicago and North Western Terminal (1906-11) in Chicago, both now demolished, were their projects as were the Union Stations in Omaha, Nebraska and St. Paul, Minnesota. Working independently in Chicago until his move to New York in 1902, Henry Ives Cobb during the 1890s executed a number of important buildings that demonstrate his proficiency in different stylistic idioms. The range includes the Tudor Gothic of the quadrangle plan and first nineteen buildings at the University of Chicago, the Venetian Gothic of the Chicago Athletic Association Building, the Dutch Renaissance of the building at the corner of Dearborn and Kinzie streets which now houses Harry Caray's Restaurant, and the Richardsonian Romanesque of the Newberry Library and the Former Chicago Historical Society Building. Minnesota architect and historian Paul Larson considers the latter to be "one of the purest monuments to Richardson's influence in the city."

In Chicago, Richardsonian Romanesque found a particularly receptive audience. Like Henry Ives Cobb, other notable members of the architectural fraternity such as Louis Sullivan, John Root, Solon Spencer Beman, and the firm of Treat and Folz, identified a kindred spirit in the new aesthetic. Even architects of lesser stature and sophistication such as Lawrence G. Hallberg and Charles M. Palmer saw the style as fitting for the upwardly mobile character of Chicago itself as cultural historian Thomas Schlereth explains:

Although these vernacular architects frequently took every possible liberty with Richardson's models, although they failed to master his sense of massing or his reverence for a building's basic elements, they produced a busty and vivacious aesthetic, emblematic of Chicago bravado in the era when it became the most American of American cities. The robust and outgoing character, sometimes a block-long panoply of color, texture, and

scale, of these streetscapes--solid yet boisterous, confident yet brassy--seemed appropriate to Chicago, a city fascinated with the gargantuan in an age prone to excess.

But Richardson's impact on Chicago was persuasive for two other reasons as well. As a built environment, Chicago was the site of actual works of Richardson himself. Secondly, the city was the seat of the Western Association of Architects, founded in 1884, and its organ *The Inland Architect* was a major carrier of Richardson's ideas. The critical role Chicago played in the promulgation of the Richardsonian Romanesque style cannot be underestimated.

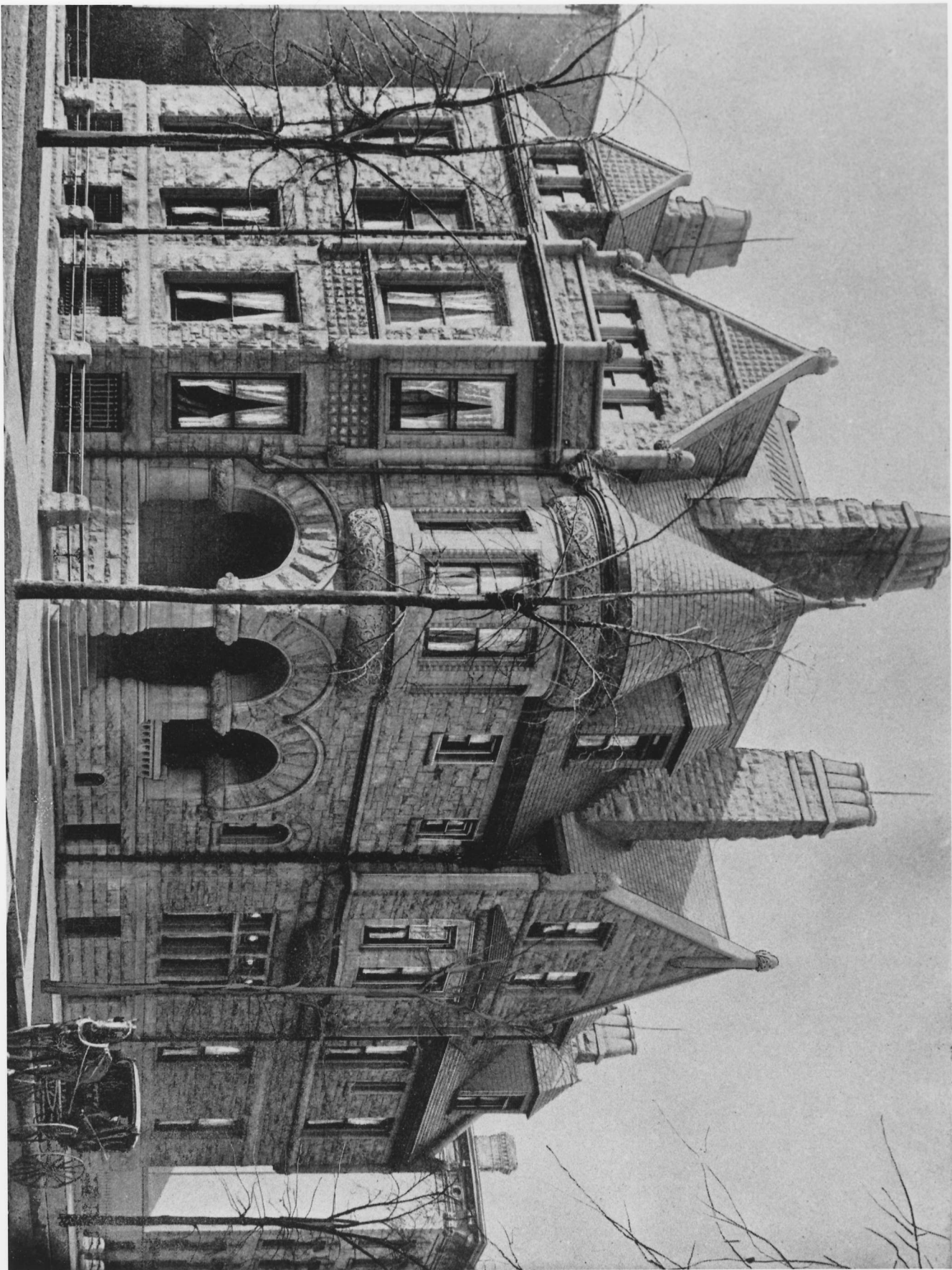
Richardsonian Romanesque did not continue as a specific style beyond the turn of the century, being succeeded in popularity by Beaux-Arts classicism. In an ironic twist, Chicago was again the hub of the new style first extensively displayed at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Nevertheless, in the mosaic of late nineteenth-century American architecture, Richardsonian Romanesque was surely one of the strongest threads. Imposing but not eccentric, picturesque but not affected, the Ransom Cable House epitomizes the style when composed by a practical but imaginative architect. Emblematic of the prosperity of Chicago and the ambitions and achievements of its citizens during the latter years of the nineteenth century, the Ransom Cable House gains added luster as one of the last remaining residential structures of any substance in the environs of North Michigan Avenue.



*OPPOSITE:*

Shortly after completion, the Ransom Cable House was pictured in Rand McNally's *Pictorial Chicago and Illustrated World's Columbian Exposition*, published in 1893.

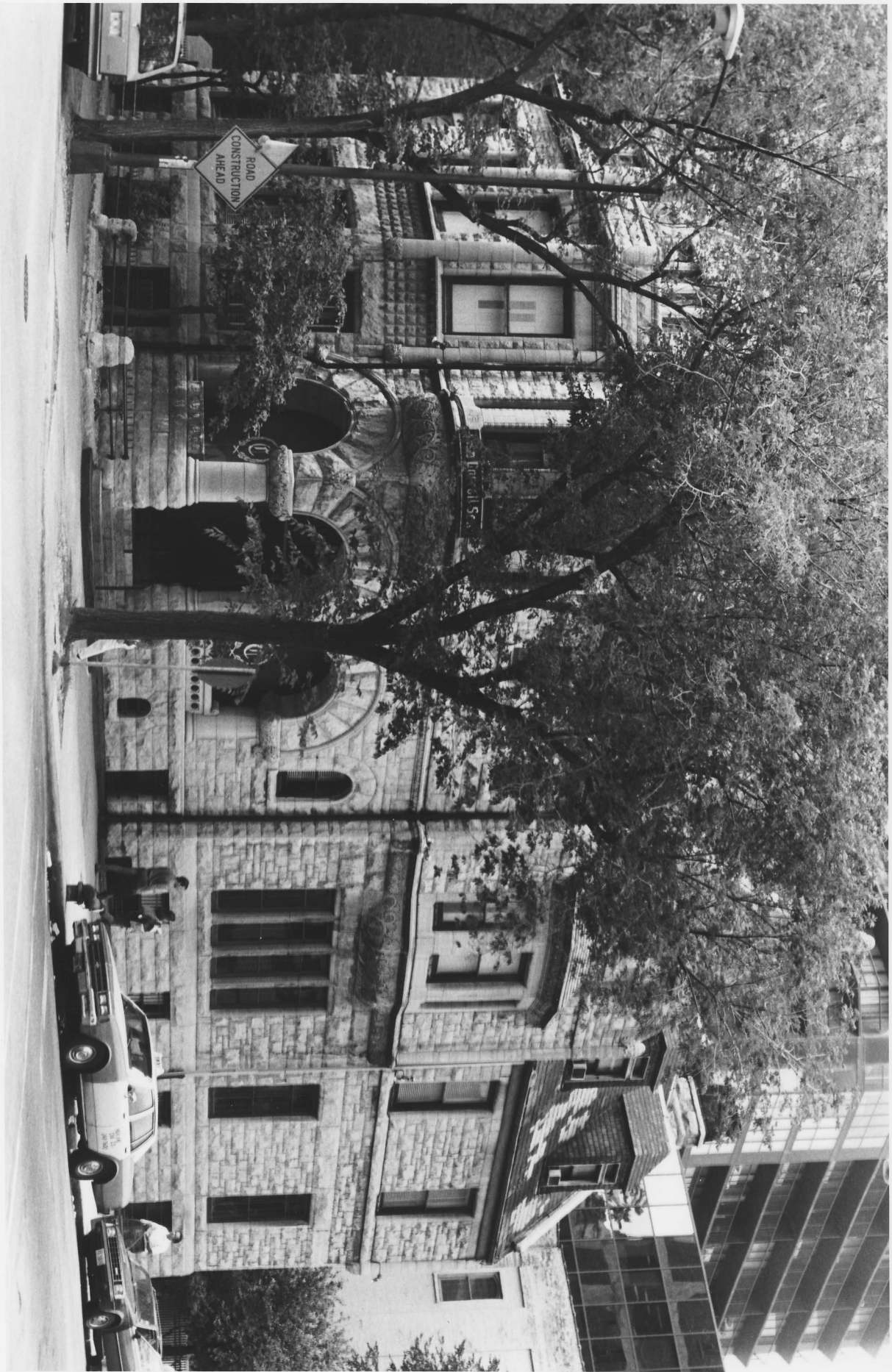
*(Courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago)*



*OPPOSITE:*

The Ransom Cable is among only a handful of structures which illustrate the original residential character of the area of the Near North Side just west of North Michigan Avenue.

*(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer, for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)*



*OPPOSITE:*

Although only an ancillary building, the coach house of the Ransom Cable House was constructed to be an exact architectural complement to the main building.

*(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer, for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)*





*OPPOSITE:*

A close-up of the Erie Street elevation illustrates the irregularly laid, rock-faced stone and decorative Byzantine foliate carving, both hallmarks of the Richardsonian Romanesque style.

*(Raymond T. Tatum, photographer for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)*



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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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